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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YAOUNDE 000009

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TAGS: CM PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S PRESIDENT BIYA SIGNALS CONSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE IN NEW YEAR'S SPEECH

REF: A. A) 07YAOUNDE 1308

¶B. B) 07YAOUNDE 1479

¶C. C) 07YAOUNDE 1496

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 d and e.

¶11. (C) Summary: In a dramatic December 31 New Year's Message, Cameroonian President Paul Biya stated he would "reconsider" term limits in the constitution. He saw 2007 as a transition year toward a higher growth path with improved living conditions. He discussed three priorities for 2008: reviving economic growth, raising living standards, and fighting corruption. He saw slow progress toward democratization, noting some gaps in the creation of democratic institutions like the Senate. In highly political moves, he expressed support for the army, opened the door to public sector salary increases, and took a strong stance on electricity problems and corruption. This was a very important speech which requires us to recalibrate our approach to pressuring Biya on the constitutional change issue. End summary.

Bakassi Killings

¶12. (U) Biya began by expressing sympathy to the families of 21 soldiers killed in the recent attack in Bakassi. He stressed the need to "get to the bottom of what transpired at Bakassi," assuring Cameroonians that investigations are under way in Nigeria and Cameroon, and that "the Nigerian authorities have assured us that they had no responsibility in this tragedy." He added that "precautions have been taken to ensure that this tragedy does not repeat itself. The nation can count on its army."

2007 Highlights

¶13. (U) Biya depicted 2007 as "in a way, a transition year" between a period of consolidating institutions and rehabilitating public finances and one of economic growth and improving living conditions. He highlighted what he saw as achievements in improving the management of the state budget, investing in social sectors and infrastructure, and taking measures "to combat price hikes" through fighting speculation, removing some taxes and liberalizing imports.

¶14. (U) He emphasized as "my main concern for nearly twenty years...to move our institutions towards a modern democracy," concluding that "little by little we are making progress."

He stressed the importance of recent laws on decentralization and noted the need to create the Senate and Constitutional Council. He praised what he saw as the "peace and transparency" of the July and September legislative elections, conceding the need to continue to improve the electoral system.

On Revising the Constitution

15. (U) He had this to say about changing the constitution:

"Still concerning the functioning of our institutions, I cannot fail to mention a problem that was raised by journalists during my recent stay in Paris and which, I am aware, has been the subject of much speculation in Cameroon for several months now. I am referring to the possible revision of our constitution and particularly Article 6, Paragraph 2, which provides that "the President of the Republic shall be elected for a term of office of seven years renewable once."

Even though the next residential election is only due in 2011. it is normal and even encouraging that Cameroonians take an interest in this issue since it concerns the future of their institutions. Many calls in favor of a revision are reaching me from all our provinces. I am obviously not indifferent to them.

In fact, there are arguments for a revision, particularly Article 6 which indeed imposes a limitation of the people's will, a limitation which is out of tune with the very idea of

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democratic choice.

I want to add that in itself a constitutional revision is nothing unusual. Our present Constitution (which is itself an outcome of a revision of our Constitution of 1972) contains revision procedures which enable, if necessary, an adjustment of the text to changes in our political society. Moreover, the procedures are of a general nature and do not concern anybody in particular.

We are therefore going to reconsider, in this spirit, those provisions of our Constitution which would need to be harmonized with recent developments in our democratic system so as to meet the expectations of the vast majority of our population."

The Three Priorities

16. (U) Biya cited three priorities for the coming year:

-- Reviving Economic Growth: Biya stressed the need for economic growth, forecasting 4.5% growth in 2008, up from 4.1% in 2007. He urged the faster launching of major agricultural and industrial projects. He went on to address problems of energy supply, particularly electricity, saying "I therefore demand that action be taken, that decisions be made, that commitments be honored and that, in case of failure, conclusions be drawn." He extolled the benefits of bio-fuel production and the importance of undertaking major projects in the mining sector.

--Raising the Standard of Living: Biya cited the need to "raise the standard of living and improve the livelihood of our people". He advocated improving the purchasing power of the Cameroonian people and seeing "in the coming months, to what extent budget wedges can allow us to envisage the gradual rising of remuneration in the public service." He stressed the importance of modernizing and professionalizing the education system and promised to "instruct the government

to provide dialysis equipment and scanners to provincial hospitals which lack them". He called for better medical assistance mechanisms, improved access to drinking water, and better housing and roads.

--The Fight Against Corruption: Biya prioritized the need to fight corruption, the "most dreadful of the scourges" impeding progress. He gave assurances that the fight "will not be limited to a few symbolic cases" and that his government would "continue to track it down wherever it is and impose sanctions accordingly."

Comment

¶ 17. (C) Biya's remarks about decentralization, economic growth, corruption and education hold little that is new. However, Biya sent several important political signals in the speech. His statement about the country's electricity problems was surprisingly strong, possibly just responding to general frustrations about power problems but possibly also signaling possible action against power provider (and U.S. company) AES/Sonel if electricity problems do not improve. The Bakassi incident has sowed some discontent in the military and Biya's speech appears aimed to show support for the army. Biya's comments on public sector salary increases are more definitive than they have been in the past and will resonate among civil servants who in the past year have gone on strike because of salary demands.

¶ 18. (C) Most importantly, with this speech, Biya has signaled a clear intention to change the term limits in the constitution. The government-run Cameroon Tribune's January 2 editorial emphasized this sense of closure, stating that the President "finally drew the line on the ground. It is an answer expected to seal the door of speculation and send the legislators to work. With this final conclusion to an intense debate, the nation can move forward to tackle the many other tasks awaiting us in the months ahead." Some of our contacts believe the President may move to amend the constitution in the next parliamentary session, in March ¶ 2008. We will monitor the reactions to Biya's speech over the coming week. Several opposition leaders and activists

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have criticized the speech and we expect this speech will harden cynicism, but we would be surprised to see a strong backlash.

¶ 19. (C) As reported ref A, in his October 30 France24 interview in Paris, Biya deflected the question of constitutional change. However, as reported ref B, almost immediately after the President returned from France there has been a steady, orchestrated drum beat to change the constitutional term limit, allowing Biya to continue on after 2011, when he is due to step down. Like most Cameroonian observers, we were not surprised about the direction Biya was going but we were surprised by how fast -- only two months after his Paris interview -- he has laid his plans. End comment.

Our Next Steps

¶ 10. (C) Many Cameroonian will now be looking to the United States for how we will react to this latest development. Ambassador expects the media will soon ask her for a reaction. We propose a four-prong strategy:

First, Press Remarks: In light of Biya's speech, post plans to modify our ref B press guidance to read:

-- The decision on whether to amend the Constitution should be for the people and the political process of Cameroon to

decide. Constitutional change requires serious deliberation and should reflect the input of all elements of society. Constitutional reform must aim to be for the benefit of society as a whole and one should carefully weigh the long term implications of any proposed change.

-- In principle, every political system stands to benefit from new leadership and the new ideas it brings. In our view, term limits and leadership change, at least every decade or so, are healthy ways to ensure democratic renewal.

-- I know that democracy is a process and it takes a lot of work. It involves building transparent and accountable institutions. It requires good governance and a robust civil society. Free and fair elections are essential. As Secretary Rice recently said about Africa, "we have seen a

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democratic transformation sweep the continent and we have observed many heads of state leaving office voluntarily". I hope that Cameroon will stay on course to be part of this transformation.

-- I agreed with President Biya in his statement in France only two months ago that public attention is best focused on more pressing concerns than constitutional reform, such as the fight against corruption, poverty and HIV/AIDS. I continue to think that is the right focus for Cameroon and is essential to generating economic growth, strengthening democracy and improving the lives of all Cameroonians.

Second, Private Discussions: we recommend the Ambassador raise our concerns about this speech privately (and more pointedly) with the President. This might be done as part of (or on the margins of) the planned February meeting of AFRICOM Commander General Ward with President Biya. A subsequent phone call from a Department principal would help reinforce the message. Ambassador will also seek appointments in the next few weeks with President Biya's close advisors.

Third, Diplomatic Outreach: we will reach out to our diplomatic colleagues in Yaounde, especially the British, Canadians, Dutch, and French to gauge their approach and response. We will also reach out to contacts in civil society and the opposition. We will report regularly on these outreach efforts and hope that they help us identify other possible sources of influence on Biya's thinking.

Fourth, Public Remarks: Ambassador plans to give a "change" speech in the next few weeks, focused on the benefits of democratic change, the need to prepare for greater political openness, and identifying democratic institutions (such as ELECAM and CONAC) that will help Cameroon along this path.

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